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Which Came First? Nature, Music, and Poetry in Mallarmé's 'Bucolique'

(Peter Dayan, University of Edinburgh, UK)

Abstract:

It is normally, if tacitly, assumed that nature came before poetry, and music somewhere in between the two. Mallarmé's 'Bucolique', in the folds of its syntax, demonstrates why this belief is unsustainable. None of those concepts really functions unless, at a more or less hidden level, each can behave as if it were both anterior to and born of the others. Mallarmé does not assert this as a rational truth; rather, he shows this behaviour at work. Poetry, in this view, is both the consequence and the precondition of nature – and vice versa. Hence, perhaps, ecopoetry is the only poetry.

Keywords:

ecopoetry Mallarmé Bucolique intermediality

Biographical note:

Peter Dayan is Professor of Word and Music Studies at the University of Edinburgh, and Guest Professor in the Department of Culture and Global Affairs at the University of Aalborg. His research explores how works of art since Mallarmé compulsively locate their value beyond the medium in which they operate.

Address for correspondence:

University of Edinburgh
Division of European Languages and Cultures
50 George Square
Edinburgh EH8 9LH

Email:

peter.dayan@ed.ac.uk

This article is an exercise in thematically directed close reading. It seeks to show how nature, music and poetry relate to each other in Mallarmé's 'Bucolique', as published in the section 'Grands Faits Divers' of his volume of collected prose works *Divagations* in 1897, the year before his death (Mallarmé, 2003: 252-56).¹ It does not engage with any body of criticism or theory, or with any of Mallarmé's work beyond that one version of a single brief essay. The reason I have allowed myself this licence is as follows.

The word 'ecopoetics' brings together a pair of notions neither of which has a clearly defined perimeter. In any rational analysis, the slipperiness of each can only too easily compound the slipperiness of the other. However, there is also a point of view from which the two have a symbiotic relationship, so that instead of undermining each other, they support or perhaps even create each other. From that point of view (which, I will suggest, is the one that Mallarmé constructs in 'Bucolique'), the ecological and the poetic share their roots. It is thus a perspective of the greatest interest to ecopoetics. It would allow us to establish a permanent and necessary bond between poetry and nature; ecopoetry would become, in fact, the only

¹ Given that 'Bucolique' is less than five pages long, I do not provide page numbers for my numerous quotations from that essay.

poetry, and poetic nature the only nature. But the shared roots of nature and poetry are hidden deeper than our language normally allows us to go. Only poetic writing can trace them.

Mallarmé had a unique genius for combining the poetic with the intellectual. In his 'poèmes critiques', he manages to express things that in almost all other circumstances remain of the order of the unsayable. I will attempt to show how he does this in 'Bucolique', explaining, or perhaps rather mapping the creation of, the notions of nature, music, and poetry – unless it be nature, music, and poetry themselves, rather than their notions, that are here created. That attempt will take me to the limits of my powers of exposition and analysis, or rather, beyond them: anyone used to savouring the subtleties of Mallarmé's prose will see that I artfully dodge many ambiguities that academic rigour would require me to unpack. I cannot undertake this task within the span of a journal article except by promising myself that my only guiding principle will be a desire to trace as faithfully as I am able how those notions interact in Mallarmé's text. They certainly do not compose a linear or rational argument, or any pattern that can easily be represented. The best image I can give of the form they appear to me to take would be of three snakes, inextricably entwined, each simultaneously eating and giving birth (viviparously) to both the others.

Mallarmé presents himself, in 'Bucolique', as a peculiarly fortunate person; fortunate because he has had the privilege of access both to nature, and to music:

témoignez comme la destinée [...] me choya. Le double adjuvant aux Lettres, extériorité et moyen ont, envers un, dans l'ordre absolu, gradué leur influence.

La Nature –

La Musique –

Termes en leur acception courante de feuillage et de sons.

Let us begin by noting that Nature, here, is not synonymous with all that exists. It appears initially to mean what we might call the unbuilt environment; a world informed, like leaves, by forces that do not appear to proceed principally from the hand of man. At the same time, music is not, here, a universal, an abstract or mystical concept, such as the music of the spheres: it refers almost throughout the essay to music as audible sound, and usually quite specifically and concretely to what Mallarmé has heard in concerts in Paris.

These two, nature and music, are 'le double adjuvant aux Lettres'. What might this mean? An 'adjuvant' is, in its primary meaning, a secondary medical treatment designed to improve the efficacy of the primary treatment. Nature and music are, then, secondary to letters; their function is to help letters to work as they should. This may seem extraordinary. Is not the cart attempting to pull the horse? Has it not always been said that nature comes before culture, and generally held that music is, if not anterior to letters, at least coeval with them, since poetry was born as song? Furthermore, music, as we commonly define it, occurs in nature, in the song of the birds, if nowhere else, and that certainly predates any written language. Which, then, came first, nature or writing? Music or poetry? As he so often does, Mallarmé has hidden a provocation in a syntactically subordinate position that allows it to pass almost unnoticed, and to insinuate itself into the reader's mind without receiving the questioning that reason would say it deserves. The point of hiding it is that it would be a mistake for us to try to resolve the question, to pierce the enigma; indeed, that would, as we shall shortly see, be the most fundamental mistake of all. The secret must be there, and we must feel drawn to it, but not as if it were destined to be resolved; it must evade not only resolution, but assimilation to the status of a problem to be addressed. Nature, music, poetry,

and humanity itself all depend on a secret created, kept, defended, and inaccessible to our rational faculties. That secret needs a hiding place. It finds that hiding place in the folds of anteriority. All the interest of the tale I have to tell here stems from the question of what came first.

When Mallarmé says that nature and music have ‘gradué leur influence’, he means, as he shortly makes clear, that one came before the other, chronologically, in his life. He came to know nature before music:

La première en date, la nature, Idée tangible pour intimer quelque réalité aux sens frustes et, par compensation, directe, communiquait à ma jeunesse une ferveur que je dis passion comme, son bûcher, les jours évaporés en majestueux suspens, elle l’allume avec le virginal espoir d’en défendre l’interprétation au lecteur d’horizons. Toute clairvoyance, que, dans ce suicide, le secret ne reste pas incompatible avec l’homme, éloigne les vapeurs de la désuétude, l’existence, la rue.

The secret does not remain incompatible with man: that double negative (again, lurking in a syntactically subordinate position) is what dispels the vapours. But what was the secret? Our best guess is that it was nature’s secret. If one reads back, one comes to suspect that it is a secret she herself creates, or at the very least that she assumes the role of its gatekeeper. She lights the bonfire in the hope of preventing the reader of horizons from interpreting it; that, indeed, seems to be the very reason for the glory of the sunset. This anthropomorphizes nature; it gives her an intention, the intention to keep a secret. We had earlier discovered that nature does not include the built environment. That exclusion clause leads us to see nature as heterogeneous to civilised humanity. However, we now see that this non-human nature is nonetheless not simply inhuman; she has properties which we normally consider reserved to humanity, notably the ability to feel hope, and to keep a secret – not to mention the ability to commit suicide. And it is that secret of an animate nature, a nature with her own life and hope, the hope that she can keep her secret, that we must see as compatible with man.²

Mallarmé is not asking us to unravel the secret of nature; on the contrary, he is asking us to allow her to create and defend her secret, as if she were human. That is the condition of ‘clairvoyance’. Already it violates two of our rational principles: that only sentient beings, and not nature as a whole (certainly not nature considered in a sunset), can have hopes; and that secrets are destined to be pierced. Why should we accept this as ‘clairvoyance’, rather than obscurantism?

But before he answers this question – or, perhaps, in order to answer it in the only possible way – Mallarmé moves on to the second, ‘dans l’ordre absolu’, of his destiny’s blessings: music.

Aussi, quand mené par je comprends quel instinct, un soir d’âge, à la musique, irrésistiblement au foyer subtil, je reconnus, sans douter, l’arrière mais renaissante flamme, où se sacrifièrent les bosquets et les cieux [...]

² I use the word ‘man’ in such contexts, in this essay, rather than a gender-neutral term which would encompass the whole of humanity, because it reflects what Mallarmé does. I am attempting to clarify his arguments, not to set them in a critical context. This gendering of humanity clearly deserves a critique – as does the parallel gendering of nature and music as feminine (one might ask whether poetry somehow escapes such gendering). In consistently giving the name of Mallarmé to the first-person narrator of this essay, I am similarly inviting a critique concerning the identification of the biographical author with the protagonist of a text. I am, I might say, uncritically adopting some nineteenth-century perspectives. My justification is that without them, Mallarmé’s nature becomes difficult to elucidate; and it is worth elucidating, though it has some politically incorrect articulations.

La merveille, selon une chronologie, d'avoir étagé la concordance; et que, si c'est soi, un tel, poursuivi aux forêts, épars, jusqu'à une source, un concert aussi d'instrument n'exclue la notion: ce fantôme, tout de suite, avec répercussion de clartés, le même, au cours de la transformation naturelle en musicale identifié.

This chronology, in 'Bucolique', the chronology of the appearance of nature and music in his life, is not simply linear. On the one hand, Mallarmé evokes his life experience, in which the appreciation of nature preceded that of music as heard in concerts. On the other hand, at strategic points throughout the essay, he also invokes the annual cycle of the cultured Parisian bourgeois, who goes to concerts in the winter, then, as the concert halls fall silent, leaves town to spend summer in the country. In both chronologies, what Mallarmé never does is to meditate on the appearance of nature or music without simultaneously introducing the point of view of the human witness. Neither exists, it appears, until it is seen. But seen by what kind of eye? Mallarmé's, certainly; but not simply so. Nature, the nature that turns out to precede music, is only visible to the witness 'si c'est soi, un tel, poursuivi aux forêts, épars, jusqu'à une source'. This curiously defined self is immediately assimilated to a 'fantôme'.³ It is only a phantom of the self that remains the same, identifiably the same, before music as before nature. The witness is thus half of a divided self; or rather, the self is divided into two halves which are also two witnesses. There is, on the one hand, the ghost, and on the other hand, he who sees and pursues ('aux forêts'); and it is the ghost, not he who pursues, who is identified in nature and in music. But is a ghost not normally the spirit of one already dead? Who or what had died in order to give birth to this ghost? Mallarmé himself? Or the notions of nature and music? Again, the problem is one of anteriority; and the key to appreciating the relationship between nature, music, and what might have appreciated them is the clairvoyance that allows that problem to remain unaddressed, and the secret to remain. Does the ghost come before or after the embodied, substantial, social person? Does nature come before writing? These are, in a sense, formally the same question; or at least, the obstacle to answering them is the same. We may not say whether nature and ghost proceed from us, or whether they are the source of our true selves. This pattern recurs throughout 'Bucolique'.

After the paragraph quoted above, Mallarmé turns his attention back to the city, to tell us why, without concerts, it is not worth staying there:

À quoi bon tarder aux palais – ce dont, aujourd'hui faute d'histoire, ils peuvent disposer est un orchestre; j'ai, pour mon usage individuel, confronté à sa chimère le délice.

'Faute d'histoire': so it would seem that if there had still been history in the palaces of Paris, Mallarmé could have found in them the qualities that he prizes in nature or music. According to which definition of history is the Paris of the Third Republic devoid of history? We are soon given a negative clue:

Y penser ou invinciblement chanter, au gré d'un bondissement allègre intérieur, quoique bas, en vers: on constate que le commun des murs réverbère l'écho par des inscriptions qui ne sont pas en rapport, proclamant l'annonce d'ustensiles, de vêtements, avec les prix.

It is the consumer economy, the economy of advertisements and of financial exchange, that blocks history, blocks what history used to have in common with the music that now, in the city, remains alone 'en rapport'. The reason is, plainly enough, in the relationship to time of the consumer economy. We see something advertised; we want it; we buy it; end of story, and end of history. What is missing (or perhaps repressed) here, what is essential to true history, is the irresolvable question of anteriority; the secret of what came first. Capitalism

³ Unless it is 'la notion' rather than 'un tel' which gives rise to the 'fantôme' evoked here. This is one of the syntactic ambiguities which, as I warned in my opening, I will have to dodge, in the interests of clarity and simplicity.

does not care for that. Neither, however, quite probably, does the mineral world, in and of itself. Two paragraphs later, we read:

La mer dont mieux vaudrait se taire que l'inscrire dans une parenthèse si, avec, n'y entre le firmament – de même se disjoint, proprement, de la nature. Quelque drame d'exception, entre eux, sévit qui a sa raison sans personne.

The idea that the built environment is not natural is a familiar one; but it is quite extraordinary to present the sea as similarly separate from nature. Mallarmé might seem to be ignoring the great French nineteenth-century poetic tradition of presenting the sea as the very emblem of the natural world, opposed to the pettiness of modern society. However, the explanation Mallarmé gives here for the sea's removal from nature is not only simple and perfectly clear; it also allows us to appreciate why that separation between nature and the sea need not apply in all circumstances. The sea in 'Bucolique' is unnatural because the drama in which it is caught up, with the sky, 'a sa raison sans personne'.

Baudelaire's great poem of the sea in *Les Fleurs du Mal* shows perfectly how the sea might be reintroduced into nature. Its very title is 'L'Homme et la mer'. He begins his poem, not with the sea itself, but with man: 'Homme libre, toujours tu chériras la mer!' (Baudelaire, 1857: 40). Man's perception of the sea frames the poem. Thus Baudelaire ensures from beginning to end that the sea in his poem never has 'sa raison sans personne'. Mallarmé's exclusion of the sea from nature might therefore be legitimately said to depend on point of view, or rather on its absence. Thus we see again that the boundary of nature is determined not simply by what is, but by what we witness. Nor will any kind of witnessing do the trick. Nature cannot be created by the eye of the social individual. She can only be conjured up by an abstraction issuing from the human, the 'Homme libre' of Baudelaire or the ghost of Mallarmé. Nothing but the eye of such ghosts can determine where nature begins and ends.

But why, one might ask, should Mallarmé single out the sea as the emblem of that which, in the unbuilt environment, is not seen to function naturally? The answer is given by a comparison with the scene which he had set earlier in the essay for the birth of nature. He had begun by specifying he was using the term 'nature' in its 'acception courante de feuillage'. Leaves, unlike the sea, periodically die, fall, rot, and are reborn, whereas the sea remains stubbornly self-identical in time. Nor does Mallarmé have to wait, as he contemplates those leaves, for them to fall physically, before the natural cycle of birth and death is brought to his mind; for the sunset provides a daily rehearsal of that cycle. 'La première en date, la nature, Idée'... Nature had become an idea, for the young Mallarmé (and of course, it does not exist unless it is an idea), when he saw the sunset, when it 'communiquait à ma jeunesse une ferveur que je dis passion comme, son bûcher, les jours évaporés en majestueux suspens, elle l'allume avec le virginal espoir d'en défendre l'interprétation au lecteur d'horizons'. Certainly, the sea has sunsets, too; but it is more difficult to figure them as burning up the sea itself; and that burning-up is all-important. For the burning cannot be taken simply as a visual impression or illusion; that would not suffice to ground nature. It must be a holocaust, a funeral pyre, a 'bûcher'; in the following sentence, it is said to be a 'suicide'. Nature is not nature unless she destroys herself regularly, immolates herself in a sacrifice. Nothing is more crucial, at this juncture, than to think through the implications of this.

A sacrifice is not merely death or destruction. It is the offering of something to a higher power, which exists in a higher sphere. The thing offered is destroyed in this world; but with the hope that it will be taken as a gift in another world. It travels in the smoke of sacrifice, from our world towards the divine. It would therefore be meaningless, it would not be sacrifice, without belief in a realm in which existence is not confined to the material, physical presence of objects on this earth. Nature, for Mallarmé, cannot be thought without

such a belief. It is not simply a set of material objects. It is also an idea; the idea that delimits the set (and may, for example, exclude the sea, or the city). But just like the idea of divinity, nature as idea can only survive if we refuse to see it as simply a product of our human imagination. We must somehow believe that it existed before us; indeed, that it created us. Which came first, the human witness, or the idea of nature? We must be prevented from deciding; and that is why nature sacrifices itself, before we can ask too many questions of her. Like the burnt offerings of pre-Christian religions, she is destroyed so that we may believe.

Unfortunately, in the course of time, burnt offerings tend to consume the figures of the divinities to whom they are offered. The logic of the holocaust is that the material is sacrificed to the immaterial, which is a higher value. But are the gods to whom one offers the sacrifice themselves material? If they are, then they are not as divine as they should be. If they are not, then they become impossible to figure, and therefore to love. No theme is more obsessive in nineteenth-century French literature than the terrible consequences of the increasing immateriality of divinity, as the gods steadily retreat over the course of recorded history, fleeing from the materiality of that which is sacrificed to them into ever more impalpable abstraction. From Nerval's *Le Christ aux oliviers* to Banville's *Les Exilés* and Flaubert's *Un Cœur simple* and *La Tentation de saint Antoine*, the question remains the same. The cultured modern mind cannot believe in a divinity with a material form. But how can we adore what we cannot figure? What becomes of divinity when the material form is lost? Is divinity lost, too? Mallarmé's answer is: no, for we have not yet run out of sacrifices. It is true that we can no longer sacrifice the material to the immaterial. But we can sacrifice one idea to a higher idea. When Mallarmé's nature lights its own funeral pyre then immolates itself thereon, no physical entities are harmed in the making of this spectacle. Only the idea of nature is consumed – or rather: the idea of her origin.

It is the sacrifice, the holocaust, that Mallarmé initially recognizes in music as the quality which makes it analogous to nature:

Aussi, quand mené par je comprends quel instinct, un soir d'âge, à la musique, irrésistiblement au foyer subtil, je reconnus, sans douter, l'arrière mais renaissante flamme, où se sacrifièrent les bosquets et les cieux; là, en public, éventée par le manque du rêve qu'elle consume, pour en épandre les ténèbres comme plafond de temple.

It is not light that results from this immolation, but darkness; the darkness of a temple's ceiling, defending us from the inhumanly and unnaturally light sky. And fanning the flame is 'le manque du rêve qu'elle consume', a magnificently ambiguous Mallarméan formulation. Is the antecedent of the relative pronoun 'manque', or is it 'rêve'? Is the flame consuming the dream, or is it consuming the dream's absence? But, more fundamentally still – the word 'éventée' has two possible meanings. Either it is fanning the flames, or it is revealing something that would have liked to remain hidden, as a fox in its earth is 'éventé' by the hounds that sniff it out. Music, like every sacrifice, both sniffs out the divine secret, and feeds it.

The following paragraph is one which we have already read as indicating a chronological relationship in Mallarmé's own life between nature and music. In the light of the sacrificial flame, we can now see another chronology superimposed on the first. Nature and music are 'deux états sacrés', of which the former came, in the history of religious sacrifice, before the latter, just as the belief in material divinities came before the belief in ideas. Material sacrifice has been replaced by the sacrifice of the material itself.

Esthétiquement la succession de deux états sacrés, ainsi m'invitèrent-ils – primitif, l'un ou foncier, dense des matériaux encore (nul scandale que l'industrie, l'en émonde ou le purifie): l'autre,

ardent, volatile dépouillement en traits qui se correspondent, maintenant proches la pensée, en plus que l'abolition du texte, lui soustrayant l'image.

The value of nature is not to be found in leaving her as she is. On the contrary: to the extent that nature is material, and our values are immaterial, it follows that nature as she materially exists must be sacrificed. This sacrifice can be of three orders. There is the sacrifice that we see in nature herself, every time the sun sets (and every autumn). There is the sacrifice of material parts of nature, as they are transformed on the altar or in a factory. And finally, there is the sacrifice of nature to music, in the order of aesthetic succession. For aesthetics are closely related to religion, and follow its historical development; but in the last resort, aesthetics can survive where religion cannot, aesthetics provide the last resort of the sacred, because they can figure the process by which the secret of the idea survives when no material form can be attributed to it, and when its relationship with human thought can no longer be one of unambivalent anteriority. Religion makes the mistake of trying to tell us that nature must have existed before us. In the succession of aesthetic states, we are learning not only that this is not true, but that its lack of truth need not mean that nature ceases to exist. Thanks to music, it lives on, transformed; and with it, our sense of the divine.

What is the place of poetry in this aesthetic succession? Music, as Mallarmé hears it, tends towards what we would today call abstraction, without text, reducing the role of the image. It is that very abstraction, that bonfire of the materialities, that gives it the right of succession to nature. Does this not bypass poetry? And yet we were told, from the beginning of the passage I have been discussing, that nature and music are but the supplement of letters, 'le double adjuvant aux Lettres'. Their purpose is to help letters to work. Once again, we are caught in the folds of undecidable anteriority. Letters must have come before music, and music must supersede letters, because music abolishes the text and the images that letters convey; writing sacrifices itself for music. But music comes before letters, poetry comes after music, because after all it is a poet who is writing this text, after having witnessed what music can do – and music, like nature, does not exist without witness. Indeed, the chronology is here doubly inverted. Not only does poetry come after music; nature comes after music (and before poetry). For the story that 'Bucolique' tells is of the poet who, after the end of the concert season, goes out to his beloved countryside, then writes. Nothing comes stably first; nothing comes stably last; everything depends on its anteriority and its posteriority to everything else; and the human, in this, is merely another participant in the counter-dance.

'Bucolique' begins, in fact, with a human – a human divided in two, like the self and the ghost we have already met:

Le Monsieur, plutôt commode, que certains observent la coutume d'accueillir par mon nom, à moi esprit, là-haut, aux espaces miroitant [...]

This spirit and its associated gentleman are moved to leave the town for the country. Soon the voice of a 'raisonneur' is heard, which tells us that a poet has no place in the modern town, for reasons which will be familiar to us: the town, as it exists today, does not recognise the importance of the divine, of art, of the timeless; it brings out the wrong side of human nature, not the ghost or spirit, but the 'Monsieur'. The implication is that it was not always thus, that once upon a time, towns had art (and as usual, this chronology is doubled: it is both historical – until the advent of the consumer society, town life had artistic meaning – and an annual cycle – in winter the town has art, in summer it has none); in those good old days, doubtless, poets had their place in Paris all year. This might appear to take us back to the opposition between a world where the spirit is at home, and a world where it is not. In nature, as in the town that possesses history and art, the spirit is at home. In the consumerist town, it is not. As usual, the world of the spirit appears not only more timeless than, but also chronologically

prior to, that of consumer society. Mallarmé, quoting Horace, takes the poet's love of nature back to ancient times. But again, as always, the order of things turns out not to be so simple.

Silence au raisonneur –

Il profère, pour marquer ses griefs pas sans dépréciation –

Que l'artiste et lettré, qui se range sous l'unique vocable de poète, n'a lui, à faire dans un lieu adonné à la foule ou hasard; serviteur, par avance, de rythmes –

Que, cependant, nécessaire d'y être venu et même d'avoir tenu bon; pour s'en retourner, docte et, n'importe où, enfouir comme inutile, précieux son tribut, avec la certitude d'aucun emploi.

Why write poetry if it is sure to be useless? The answer can only be that, while it may be useless in this world, there is a higher point of view from which that does not matter. That higher point of view depends on the logic of the sacrifice. The word of the poet is a sacrificed word, a word that has lost its value in the material world. But one cannot sacrifice that which originally had no value in this world. The poet must take the currency of the town, the language of the crowd, turning it into a treasure with no exchange value beyond its appeal to the sacred (just as the priest of ancient times took the currency of his time – a lamb, perhaps – and turned it into something that could no longer be sold). That would be impossible if the town and its currency did not exist. Therefore, for the poet, common language must come before poetry, and the town must come before the country. And indeed, in 'Bucolique', we are always shown the poet moving from the town to the country, never the contrary. The reference to Horace supports this; for Horace, too, is describing a poet who lives in the town, and dreams of going out to the country. Perhaps, then, nature was always something which poets saw where they did not live, perhaps it always came after, not before, an unnatural civilisation. And yet it is also always felt to have existed beforehand. Are not the rhythms that the poet serves present in nature before him, before he finds them, before he leaves the town to discover them? One could continue indefinitely with these inversions of anteriority, and it would get one nowhere. That is, doubtless, why Mallarmé places the whole passage under the invocation:

Silence au raisonneur –

The reasoned condemnation of the town is something to which we should not listen because it threatens the undecidability of the anteriority of nature. We should not listen to the voice of reason, exactly as we should not try to pierce the secret of nature; the secret that she protects from us by sacrificing herself.

But in 'Bucolique', the voice of reason need not be silenced. Mallarmé says, 'Silence au raisonneur' – and then he lets the reasoner speak. This is the true privilege of poetry. The reasoner speaks; he tries to reason. His reason, however, as soon as he speaks of poetry and of nature, betrays itself. He would like to tell us that the town is no place for poets; that nature is where poets should be. In fact, he also tells us the opposite. The very function of poetry is to use the language of reason to defeat reason; to use the language of anteriority to render anteriority undecidable. Poetry alone, then, can tell us what nature really is. Nature is neither before us, nor after us, nor with us; she did not invent us, and we did not invent her; yet we would not exist without her, nor she without us. One could say exactly the same of music, and of poetry. But only poetry can say this. Nature and music share the condition; they do not share the ability to impart it. I could not have written this essay about a piece of music or about a sunset in a forest.

'Bucolique' begins with the question of how a human is seen. It ends with the same question. Between the beginning and the ending, there is, one might say, a distance of 'quinze

lieues', about thirty-five miles, or a ninety-minute train journey – the distance from Paris to the forest of Fontainebleau. At the beginning, 'Le Monsieur, plutôt commode', appears to be in the capital; at the end, though his journey is not explicitly described, we have the clear impression that he is in the countryside, alone. Who will see him there? Or will he suffer the unnatural fate of that which has its 'raison sans personne'? No need to worry: it is sufficient for him to perceive himself, and this is what he does. As ever, he divides himself into a perceiver and a perceived. And again, as ever, the division is not ideologically neutral. For humanity to be what it must be, the perceived must be caught in the folds of the undecidable anteriority, with music and with nature. It must make them, and they must make it. It cannot simply be in the time of the urban story; it must be in the process of escaping from that time.

The last paragraph of 'Bucolique' is a single rich sentence which describes the escape from Paris, the arrival in the country, the rejection of the 'miasme' of urban life, the joy of finding nature, and the feeling that our own magnificence is to be seen in nature herself. But we need not have forgotten that nature in 'Bucolique' has a secret to defend, for which she daily immolates herself. And if one reads the sentence carefully, one will see that secret well defended. One might suspect that in fact, nature, inscrutable, gives nothing of herself away. She gives us back only what we give to her – which is, perhaps, our own music. Nature, we discover, reveals our magnificence only when she hears that music. It is only he who in imagination cuts and plays a flute who, escaping from the noise of the town, can hear the voice of nature. Does nature, then, come before music, and before the human who makes it, as the reed comes before the pipe? Or does the pipe-player create the music and, beyond it, nature? As ever, the anteriority is undecidable. But in the end, 'undecidable' is not the right word. Rather, both directions of the anteriority are necessary. There is no music and no true humanity without nature both before and after, and vice versa.

Combien, véritablement, une capitale, où s'exaspère le présent, restreint, dehors, la portée de ce miasme.. il ne traverse l'atmosphère de quinze lieues, au-dessus d'herbes et de feuilles.. nul intérêt ne rappellerait sur le coup – combien de la forteresse construite, par les gens, exprès, contre leur magnificence comme la répand la nature, sauf un recours à la musique dont le haut fourneau transmutatoire chôme, ces mois – je dis combien, sur les remparts, tonne, peu loin, le canon de l'actualité: que le bruit puisse cesser à une si faible distance pour qui coupe, en imagination, une flûte où nouer sa joie selon divers motifs celui, surtout, de se percevoir, simple, infiniment sur la terre.

Let us not lose sight of the fact that the music of this flute is imaginary, not real. Up to this point, all the music in 'Bucolique' had seemed to have sounded; it was the music of concerts earlier heard in Paris. Now, we have the inaudible music of the poet in the country. That music born of poetry, which comes (does it not?) after the music heard in concerts, is what allows the poet to see himself as a spirit, out of time, 'simple, infiniment sur la terre'. No one, in Mallarmé's post-religious world where the sacred cannot be material, can actually be infinitely on the earth. The earth itself cannot be infinite, nor can nature. The infinite has no physical place here. Nor does the simple. But we can perceive ourselves as simple, and infinitely on the earth, provided that we can allow music, nature, and our own sense of our divided humanity to retain the secret of their infinitely reversible anteriority; and the means to that perception, which creates human spirituality just as it creates nature, is called poetry.

Can we stop there? No. What I have just said might seem to imply that poetry comes first; that it appears – from where? – to give birth to nature, to spirituality, perhaps to music, and to our perception of ourselves as simple, infinitely on the earth. That chronological priority, if we allowed it to stand, would put an end to the undecidable anteriority, and kill poetry itself. Nature founds and limits poetry as much as poetry founds and limits nature. Poetry must always also appear determined by an absolute, prior, chronologically anterior principle – whether we call that principle the divine, or nature, or music.

I have so far, in accordance with the method I set out in my first paragraph, refrained from quoting any text other than ‘Bucolique’, with the exception of one line from Baudelaire. But I would not like to give the impression that Mallarmé’s poem is itself an absolute source. So I will allow myself to end by quoting the man who was the key figure in the creation of the musical tradition which gave rise to the Parisian concerts which Mallarmé attended, and which in ‘Bucolique’ represent the echo of nature in civilisation. Beethoven wrote in a draft letter of 1825:

Wie denn in der Kunst die Natur, <gegründ> u. sie wiederum die Natur in der Kunst gegründet ist – (Beethoven, 1996: 96)

Inasmuch as Nature is founded on Art, and, again, Art is founded on Nature – (Beethoven, 1961:1224)

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